

## 2016 Winning Essay by Emily Lueder

I began my research for my senior thesis by intensifying Dr. Melanie Trexler's course, which was entitled, "Islamic Culture and Religion." I knew that I wanted to research women's rights in Islam, but in order to narrow my focus, I worked with Prof. Rebecca Butler to develop a research topic. I began with a topic of interest web and generated several sample research questions. Based on those questions, I started searching for books and articles through various databases (see below) to try to answer those questions. As I searched, I kept a list of keywords to remember what terms were useful in addressing my questions and which terms were not. This ongoing list ultimately aided my research throughout the project's entirety.

Through the topic of interest web, preliminary searches, and selectively reading the research I uncovered, I developed my initial research question: To what extent has the United Nations had an impact on women's education in Afghanistan? This research question guided the next step of my research, my literature review.

I utilized several databases, including the ATLA Religion database, Academic Search Complete, and Oxford Islamic Studies Online, in order to find scholarly articles and encyclopedia entries. I also utilized books available at the Christopher Center and through WorldCat and Interlibrary Loan. As I read through the literature in preparation to write the review, I identified several issues faced by women in Afghanistan, including limited access to healthcare and health education, displacement, and education.

Based on the data I uncovered, I ultimately decided that I wanted to focus on women's education in Afghanistan during and after the Taliban's rule. I based this decision on the sources I had access to; I could utilize current scholarly articles and books, as well as Islamic sacred texts, such as the Qur'an and hadith reports, to understand multiple perspectives about women's education in Afghanistan. As I continued my research, it became immensely important to me that I capture the voices of Afghan women and girls, who were and continue to be victimized by the Taliban. Thus, I once again sought for books at the Christopher Center and through Interlibrary Loan to bring the perspective of Afghan women and girls to the forefront of my project.

After obtaining a significant amount of research and writing the literature review, I began to work on an initial thesis statement and an outline of my paper. However, women's education in Afghanistan was still too broad and I needed to narrow my topic once again. I reviewed my research and realized three main approaches regarding Muslim women's education had emerged from my research: the Islamic fundamentalist approach, the Muslim feminist approach, and the secular feminist approach. Upon recognizing these themes, I simply needed to eliminate some of my current research to narrow my topic and find sources that related directly to each one of the three approaches.

With the help of Dr. Trexler, who was my best resource throughout this project, I began the drafting process. I would often return to the databases mentioned above for additional articles and to the stacks and ILL. Through the drafting part of the process, I realized that it is important to be flexible while researching. I did not end where I began. My project was guided by evidence, rather than an opinion that I formulated on day one of researching.

Finally, after all of my researching, editing, and rewriting (multiple times!), I argued that based on the current realities in Afghanistan, the Muslim feminist approach is the ideal model for structuring

education in Afghanistan because it enables women to be devout Muslims, while also enabling them to fully participate in society. I am truly confident that my project reflects the recent issue of women's education in Afghanistan because of the wide array of resources available at the Christopher Center and its databases. In addition, because of materials at the Christopher Center, I am confident that I shed light on the perspective of those most affected by restrictions on education, the Afghan women.